

16. “Traveling for a better world with Alsharq Travels”

Julia Gerlach with Christoph Dinkelaker¹

Julia Gerlach: Christoph, you're one of the few Germans included in this book on Arab Berlin. Who are you?

Christoph Dinkelaker: I studied Islamic and political sciences and history in Berlin and Beirut, and in the last years of university, I founded Alsharq with two university friends. At the time, we felt that there was a lot missing in the media reporting on Western Asia and Northern Africa, and we wanted to change that. Many of the interesting developments, voices, and opinions were not being heard in Germany. We started to translate and publish articles from exciting people in the MENA-Region. We also felt that news from the Middle East was often looked at from a very Eurocentric point of view: What does it mean for our security? The three of us had witnessed the so-called “Cedar Revolution” in Lebanon. Labeling the movements as Pro-Western, Radical Islamic, etc., had little to do with what was happening. More and more, we concluded that writing and publishing about the Middle East wasn't enough to bring actual change to people's mindsets. So we started to organize trips to the region for people in Germany. Our objective is to bring people in contact with people from the Middle East and to offer them real experiences to connect with the region. That's what I've been doing, for the most part, for the past 11 years.

J.G.: How did you start being interested in the Middle East?

C.D.: I spent one year in Beirut doing my civil service at an orphanage. It was a very interesting experience and probably the year of my life that changed me the most. Later, I decided that I wanted to understand better what was going on in Lebanon and the region. I spent some time in Jerusalem working for the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and for the Willy Brandt Center on a project on Palestinian-Israeli dialogue. I also spent many months in Damascus. Since then, I've been traveling to the region from Berlin regularly. For example, this October, I spent a month in Iraq organizing several trips, and just this week I came back from Oman.

1 Interview translated from German by Julia Gerlach.

J.G.: What fascinates you about the Middle East and keeps you traveling there all the time?

C.D.: I like to go back to the same places and connect to the same people to see how their lives have changed. For example, to see how people living under authoritarian rule organize their daily life. How many things are still possible, even under difficult political circumstances? I like the more relaxed and laid-back way of life, despite omnipresent hardships. This is very different from the restless atmosphere in Berlin. Berlin is a place where I never get to relax completely.

There are also some quite egoistic reasons to travel there: I've become used to spending several months every winter in Oman – the calmest, friendliest, most relaxed place I know. Oman is the opposite of all the conflict-related stereotypes people in Germany envision when they think of “the Arab world”. That's also why I try to bring as many people as possible to Oman to share this experience.

J.G.: I guess you get many questions from people there about why you travel so much to Arab countries. How do people react?

C.D.: The interaction is often friendlier and more personal. I find it easier to connect with people I meet. In my first year in Beirut, I met people who gave me the chance to feel at home and who let me become part of their life. I got very interested in the political and social questions there, something I was never as involved in back in Germany.

In Bilad al-Sham in general I have this feeling of belonging and of feeling at home. I guess it would still be like that now, even though I'm not sure that I would find any friends or any people I know in Damascus.

J.G.: Because they are all in Berlin now?

C.D.: Yes, in Berlin or other counties – or dead.

J.G.: I'm sure you also get questions from people who are sure that you must be working for the Secret Service simply because they can't believe that anyone might be interested enough in Arab culture to take on the hardship of learning Arabic.

C.D.: Yes, sometimes I get these questions, but I don't take them seriously anymore. Many people also can't believe working with war-torn countries like Iraq and Afghanistan makes sense. They don't believe we can make money from what we are doing. So, I very often get the question of why I didn't take the opportunity to choose a more “serious” profession like becoming an engineer in Germany.

J.G.: Traveling through interesting countries alone, experiencing what you were describing for yourself – I understand this is fascinating. Going there with groups of tourists is something else. What makes you do that?

C.D.: My objective is to bring people together. That's why I take people to these countries. We might organize a hiking trip for guests from Germany with local guides. Sure, the group from Germany is still more privileged and it's never an interaction among peers. But still, it's possible to form a connection and also part of our trips to discuss these privileges and what they mean to us in such a situation. We also meet with politicians, members of civil society, and so on. The main focus is on reducing prejudices and changing the perception of the region and its people. In many cases, people make friends; in some cases, they even find love; and most people take home something that might affect their life or how they see the Middle East in some way. They take this home and share it with those around them in Germany, which is what we want to achieve.

J.G.: So, basically, you do what Western NGOs do when they provide political education in countries like Iraq, just the other way around? Instead of teaching the people in the Middle East, you teach Germans?

C.D.: That's a very nice way of describing it. Yes, I think we want to work in both directions, but we're much more able to address the audience in Germany. It's where we can change perceptions and ways of thinking. In many cases, the trips have actually changed a lot. Some people have switched jobs, others have moved to Middle Eastern countries, or as mentioned, they've even found love.

J.G.: But it might also go wrong. I can imagine that people might quite often reconfirm their prejudices. They might go home and say: This confirms what I've always thought about the Arabs. No wonder the countries have so many problems. There is this saying: "What's the difference between tourism and racism? Two weeks." What do you think of that?

C.D.: I actually haven't had many experiences like that. In one case, we had an AfD-voter on one of our trips. I think it was to Lebanon, and I guess his objective was to learn more about why the Arabs are the way they are. We did our best; at least he discovered that reality is much more diverse than he thought. He got to know many different people and perspectives. I can't imagine that it didn't change his way of thinking.

J.G.: I know quite a few people who came to visit me in Egypt while I was living there who felt uncomfortable and decided not to go out anymore. One friend even said, “I think I am afraid of Islam. I will stay indoors.” What can you do to avoid this?

C.D.: It’s important to let people feel at ease right from the beginning. We might organize a night out with some young people in a hipster location like Sulaymaniyah in Kurdish Iraq. That can be a good icebreaker. It’s very rare for people to absolutely not get along. I remember one case of a woman who decided she couldn’t cope with wearing a Hijab in Iran and the gender roles there, so she asked me to book her an early flight home.

J.G.: In the last decades, there’s been a long discussion on the most effective ways of bridging the gap between the Arab world and the so-called West. Media reporting, NGO-work, or a different political approach by the governments have all been mentioned, but many experts and activists have come to the same conclusion as you, and say: Personal experience is the best way. The only problem is that it requires a lot of resources and traveling. It isn’t feasible to connect every person with a counterpart from the other side of the Mediterranean.

C.D.: Yes, that’s right. We can only address people who can afford our trips. That means that many are excluded. Talking about privilege is important to us. We often start the discussions at the beginning of our trips with an introduction to colonialism and talk about the hierarchies that people might observe in these countries.

J.G.: Do you offer trips to Syria?

C.D.: No, even though it’s possible to go to Syria now and other agencies are offering touristic trips to Damascus, I refuse to do so for political reasons. However, we offer digital trips to Syria and to other places that are out of reach for tourism, like Afghanistan. We came up with these formats as a response to the pandemic, but they’re such a success that I think we’ll keep them in our program even after COVID-19. The digital trip to Syria is always booked out and is a big success. It’s a two-day trip with many interesting people who tell their stories and discuss issues with the audience. We can even offer a live visit to the old city of Damascus. People see a degree of normal life going on, but at the same time, they see the many soldiers and security personnel.

By the way, on all our trips – online and offline – we have more and more people with family connections to the region. It’s typical to find people in our groups who came to Germany as children. One of them told me, “I wanted to visit ‘my’ country, and if I had traveled there the ‘normal’ way, I would have spent the whole time visiting my aunts and uncles and would not have seen anything of the country.”

J.G.: Let's change the perspective. You mentioned that you've been observing what is changing in the Middle East. I'm sure you're also observing what is changing in Berlin. What comes to mind when you think of Arab Berlin?

C.D.: Berlin has changed a lot. It is much more Arabic. Just think of all the goods available now: Food, clothing, and many cultural events: Music, theater, and discussions. Looking at the Arab spaces in Berlin, you realize there's a new attitude. The Arab community is much more confident. Especially since 2015, there has been a big change. We have many more migrant, post-migrant, and exile organizations working on the situation in the countries in the Middle East and who are involved in setting the agenda. They want to influence the Middle East's perception in Germany and Europe. German-founded organizations are increasingly seen as allies. They might work with an organization like ours because we're experienced in certain things, such as digital events. They also might work with us to form a better connection to the German media and to mainstream audiences. But nevertheless, it's clear: These new organizations – like Nawara, for example, an organization founded by young academics from Egypt and other countries – have their own idea of how they want the Middle East to be perceived in the Western media and society.

I also think that the spheres are divided more. I remember a few years ago there were more organizations where people of Middle Eastern and German origin would work together. Now I think the organizations are more divided. Still, there's a lot of cooperation.

J.G.: One of your objectives in founding Alsharq in 2005 was to change how the media reports on the Middle East. How do you see changes in this field?

C.D.: I think many things have changed. Even though the newsrooms are still very white-dominated, the type of reporting has changed. It's not as Eurocentric anymore, and more voices from the Middle East are present in the mainstream media. But still, we see that many voices and perspectives from the region are not being heard or paid attention to in Germany. It's a pity! There's a lot missing from German discourse. We lack translators and cultural transmitters to bring these voices into the mainstream.

J.G.: I'd say that the perspective has narrowed a lot. Look at how many papers have reduced the number of correspondents in the region. The horizon of a typical newspaper reader was much broader just a couple of years back. COVID-19 has narrowed it even more: We focus on the number of daily injections, and apart from that, don't look at what is happening in Cairo, Damascus, or Sulaymanyah. The German audience is not as curious about other perspectives these days. On the other hand, I know quite a few people from the Middle East living in Berlin who are perfectly happy with

the feeling of belonging to the city without having any connection to the German part of the city.

C.D.: I think this is a problematic development, and my answer to this is the same as the answer to prejudice from the other side: The only way to overcome it is to connect people with each other. I like initiatives like “Hometown Hannover”, where people interact and meet to do things together. We need more of this, connecting people to their neighbors, to the people in their *kiez*.

J.G.: If I booked a trip to Arab Berlin, where would you take me?

C.D.: We actually have a trip for that in our program. Mohammad Ali Chahrour guides groups through Neukölln and tells his story of growing up with “*Kettenduldungen*” (chain exceptional leave to remain), about going to the *Rüttli-Schule*, and he takes the group to *Sonnenallee*.

J.G.: Thank you. That sounds great! Now let me ask you the questions every taxi driver in Cairo and Amman would ask: Are you married? Is your wife Arab?

C.D.: No.

C.D.: That’s a good one. No, I don’t have kids. I’m 38, by the way, in case that was your next question. – One more thing: We didn’t discuss our name, Alsharq. We chose it way back when we started in 2005. Later, we found it highly problematic because of its Orientalist connotation. That’s why we chose the name *dis:orient* for our journalistic work. Alsharq had already become a known brand for the travel agency, so we didn’t want to change it. Talking about the name is always part of our introduction when we get to know a new travel group. That’s why I still think it’s a good name: It’s a perfect starting point for discussion and reflection.